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Life, End of: Secular Eschatology in Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* and Anna Kavan's *Ice*

Introduction

Speaking of liminal events and borderline experiences, in her influential work *Powers of Horror* Julia Kristeva theorises the abject, assessing it to be something that essentially "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 1982: 4). The dynamics and violence inherent to abjection, oftentimes "articulated by *negation* and its modalities, *transgression*, *denial*, and *repudiation*" (6; emphases in the original), seem very pertinent to contemporary understandings of notions of the event and the aftermath, both of which appear to be characterised by intrinsic subversiveness, non-concreteness, and abjectal transgressiveness. An important subject to a whole host of theoreticians, including Baudrillard, Deleuze, or Derrida, they have already been conceptualised in academia in a number of ways that account for their complex ontic status. To exemplify: following Lyotard's theory of libidinal economy, one could equate an event with an instance of an energetic (or libidinal) influx into a formal (e.g., societal) system, which that system cannot contain or structure. It is a rupture in its workflow; something that goes beyond the normal and the quotidian, and what cannot be contextualised by an individual in its entirety, not unlike the object of Kristeva's abjection. In this sense,

> The *truth* of a being, since we must speak in this way, taken as a sign, turns out to be situated *outside* the sign, and even […] *above* it. This being *signifies something other* than what it is: it signifies that of which it is the simulacrum, but, because it is not what it signifies, it also signifies the distance which keeps them

apart, dissimilitude, the lack of being which separates them. (Lyotard 2015: 84; emphases in the original)

Such a polarising and, in many ways, unorthodox understanding of the event is a sort of *volta* in the postmodern intellectual thought. Thus interpreted, the structuration of whole societies, of cultural heritage, and of art, is based on the economy of libidinal energies, where people's interactions with one another are contingent on a haphazard flow of libidinal energy, which in itself bespeaks the chaotic status of an event, nullifying its supposed regularity.

The issue in question is particularly interesting when one tries to conceptualise the *éskhaton* (*ἔσχατον*), "the end," traditionally equated, as Gerhard Sauter (1988) would have it, with "death and the state after death, the resurrection of the dead, the last Judgement, the consummation of the world, [...] and, finally, life everlasting" (499). The notion of "the end of days," in and of itself, can be examined from two standpoints and assessed as appurtenant to either *vertical* or *horizontal* eschatology (Lösel 2001: 215). The former pertains to the so-called *eschata*: theorisations of suffering and sin, of salvation and divine deliverance, or of theodicy. The latter is its secular rendition – stripped off of its conventionally theological or religious undertone, horizontal eschatology focuses on the pre-divine and the quotidian, on what is ontologically and epistemically available to human beings, and what is within the realm of intelligibility.

Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out* (1964) and Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967) are two distinct, most innovative attempts at a depiction of the broadly understood "end of life," as seen from the "horizontal," that is secular, perspective. Both narratives are based on a tragic event and its lingering consequences, where the specific and highly fragmented representation of the aftermath poses a number of hermeneutic difficulties. The reader is entangled in an intricate, idiosyncratic discourse fully contingent on randomly ordered narrative strings and occasional stream-of-consciousness-like fragments whose truth-value can never be satisfactorily measured. The world and the characters in both novels are as *un-real* as they are *un-presentable*; governed by their twisted internal logic and deprived of a clear causal relationship, the stories – with their deeply oneiric undertone – are like a Maya Deren film: employing complex symbolism, the narratives oscillate, similarly to Lyotard's libidinal energies, between the spheres of the conscious and the unconscious, where the characters feel impelled to revisit their burdensome past, and do so in a very unstraightforward manner and under different guises. Venturing forth into the

abjectal liminal space – one beyond the realm of the subject *and* the object – they disassociate themselves from their own experiences in an attempt to deflect the traumatic potential of their former plight.

Beyond the Event: The Reversal of Values in Christine Brooke-Rose's *Out*

According to Hélène Cixous, as can be read on the back cover of *The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus* (the 2006 edition), Christine Brooke-Rose "has undertaken the interpretation of an other world that is to be found beyond place, beyond life, beyond space even, there where the real surfs into the imaginary." From the early 1960s thereon, the writer – having published four relatively conventional novels – decides to wend a new path: that of experiment. Inspired by and well-versed in contemporary Francophone literature of that time, she writes in a manner reminiscent of the French *nouveau roman*, which she herself readily acknowledges by commenting upon the techniques and practices of its main proponents. *Out*, her first truly experimental (anti-)novel skilfully blends fiction and metatheory with a view of achieving a new quality, forcing the reader to actively co-construct and piece together the narrative as it unfolds. As stated by Alain Robbe-Grillet (1996: 8), one of her favourite authors, "the novel's forms must evolve in order to remain alive," and so do the characters that "belong neither to the realm of psychology nor to that of sociology, nor even to symbolism, still less to history or ethics" (128). The *nouveau romancier* goes on to say, what could equally be seconded by Brooke-Rose: "We no longer believe in the fixed significations, the ready-made meanings which afforded man the old divine order and subsequently the rationalist order of the nineteenth century, but we project onto man all our hopes: it is the forms man creates which can attach significations to the world" (Robbe-Grillet 1996: 141). Admittedly, semiosis and the processes of meaning-making in Brooke-Rose's output elude an easy theorisation. As can be ascertained on the example of *Out*, for the reader to cognise the multiplicity of senses of a particular sign, they have to account for its polysemic nature, which is all the more difficult given how the same and similar events repeat themselves many a time on the novel's pages, being narratively transfigured as they recur, due to which fact the meaning and the truth-value of each account constantly change, too. As phrased by one of the unnamed characters in the story, "in an age of international and interracial enlightenment such as ours revelation is open to all, regardless

of age, sex, race or creed. It is not, however, compulsory. It's entirely up to you. Just fill up this form and queue here" (Brooke-Rose 2006: 115).

The aforementioned "enlightenment" pertains to the socio-political situation after "the displacement," the cataclysmic event that changed the world order as we know it. It led to a realignment of powers, with the world being divided into Sino-America, Afro-Eurasia, and Chinese Europe. But perhaps most importantly, the balance tilted favourably towards people of colour: "Pink is a colour. Yellow is a colour. Beige is a colour" (48), but white dermis is identified as a "malady," as "waxiness" brought about by "a deficiency in the liver" (ibid.). Caucasian people are merely referred to as the "Colourless" – they are presented as feeble and frail, and the cause of their weakness may be traced back to the displacement, which seems to have been the result of a nuclear conflict. Communities whose skin is rich in eumelanin thrive and prosper, forming new elites and exerting their supremacy, whereas white individuals are regarded as of lower status and thus reduced to the caste of servants. They are victims in and of the discourse: incapacitated, they cannot work through and verbalise their problematic experiences. Brooke-Rose efficaciously presents the magnitude of their tragic situation by making her protagonist a senile indisposed white male with no name and no essential backstory. His blankness and non-concreteness make him an everyman, which in and of itself universalises the eschatological plane of the novel. The man is subject to, on the one hand, a range of psychosomatic and somatopsychic (micro)reactions which govern his existence in a borderline vegetative state, and – on the other hand – to external forces which counteract his every move. The protagonist of Brooke-Rose's work may very well be identified as the central consciousness of the novel, but at the same time his apathetic torpor effectively constricts the flow of the narrative, which can be concluded upon reading the very beginning of the story:

> A fly straddles another fly on the faded denim stretched over the knee. Sooner or later, the knee will have to make a move, but now it is immobilised by the two flies, the lower of which is so still that it seems dead. The fly on top is on the contrary quite agitated, […] putting out its left foreleg to whip, or maybe to stroke some sort of reaction out of the fly beneath, which, however, remains so still that it seems dead. A microscope might perhaps reveal animal ecstasy in its innumerable eyes, but only to the human mind behind the microscope, and besides, the fetching and rigging up of a microscope, if one were available, would interrupt the flies. *Sooner or later some such interruption will be inevitable*; there will be an itch to scratch or a nervous movement to make or even

a bladder to go and empty. But now there is only immobility. (Brooke-Rose 2006: 11; my emphasis)

Not even addressed directly as an individual, the character is but a number of *partes pro toto*: a collection of limbs and organs that add up to a man of flesh and blood. The reader knows he exists because of the presence of his knee on which the flies sit; this narrative close-up seems to present his whole world, as if everything else was merely a minor element of *mise en scène*. The man's thoughts drift away easily, which leads to repetitions, as with multiple references to the fly "so still that it seems dead." The mimetic exactitude of that fragment, reinforced by the image of a microscope, discloses a narrative need, perhaps a necessity, to sustain a high degree of verisimilitude at all times. The feelings and affective responses of the main character seem to be of no greater consequence to the narrative, and his solipsistic depiction of the intratextual world is thus desensitised and impassive.

Admittedly, in the wake of the nuclear conflict, the complete reversal of values situates the main character in the environs he does not fully understand, what is exacerbated by a very specific formal constraint adopted by Brooke-Rose. Having been inspired by the lipogrammatic experiments of the Oulipian writers, with every new novel the author decides to incorporate a different literary conceit – here, she utilises what she calls "SPT," that is "scientific present tense" (Brooke-Rose 2002: 140), based on "general statements and universal questions, the novelistic equivalent of 'scientific statements'" (151). According to Karen Lawrence:

> The most significant and consistent lipogram Brooke-Rose invents in her fiction is a narratorless narrative that eschews the past tense and first-person. With no introspection (hence, no one vantage point for looking back) and no origin or voice speaking the text, she constantly raises the question "Who speaks?" (Lawrence 2010: 20)

The writer "translates this objective scientific present into the fictionalization of life *before* human consciousness, memory, and language" (151; my emphasis), yet what the reader must bear in mind is that it is imperative to dispel the illusion that what happens "here and now" can be instantaneously interpreted play-by-play and portrayed as full of meaning and sense, narrative or otherwise. In fact, the opposite appears to be true: post-event, the always-already internalised information can only be fully analysed with hindsight; the true meaning is always postponed (perhaps in

parallel to *différance* in Derrida's writing, wherein the true sense of a word – just like the true sense of an event – is forever "deferred" in an infinite chain of decoding of new *signifiés*). Not being able to refer to their own past and to verbalise their trauma, the characters in *Out* are doomed to failure. Caught in a vicious circle, the protagonist repeats the same things *ad nauseam*, in which sense the world of the novel – despite its apparent restructuration – is also like a nightmarish purgatory. The old man acquiesces at one point in the narrative: "I believe we're being slowly exterminated" (Brooke-Rose 2006: 158). As it eventually turns out, he is quite close to the truth: people are not necessarily *exterminated* but *retransfigured neurologically* by means of a process called "psychoscopy" (140), wherein their thoughts, feelings, and aspirations are rewritten by a machine. Since the main character refuses to be "psychoscoped," he tries to re-establish his sense of identity elsewhere. The process is anything but simple: being cognitively and linguistically impaired, the man has no real recollections to work on, and the only discursive practices at his disposal are the ones which effectively distort and further complicate his self-image. In the end, he is forced to concede: "Knowledge certain or indubitable is unobtainable" (60), a statement strikingly similar to Brooke-Rose's own opinions, expressed in her insightful study *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*:

> The brute ontological fact is inaccessible to us, since man can only re-present it through his many arbitrary systems including language and the languages of science. […] Certainly what used to be called empirical reality, or the world, seems to have become more and more unreal, and what has long been regarded as unreal is more and more turned to or studied as the only "true" or "another and equally valid" reality. (Brooke-Rose 2010: 4)

In *Out*, not unlike in Robbe-Grillet's fiction, "the bizarre leaps in time and perspective, together with an effect of instantaneousness and a transgression of narrative levels, fundamentally disturb familiar values by distancing and producing a disquieting – some would say subversive – uncertainty" (Brooke-Rose 2010: 310). The said uncertainty seems to be the cornerstone of Brooke-Rose's secular eschatology, for in the intratextual reality of her novel there are no ontologically stable truths and, contrary to its title, there is no easy way *out*, and certainly: no way *out* or *beyond* discourse.

Hyperreal, Surreal, Unreal: Affective Parallax in Anna Kavan's *Ice*

The situation is markedly different in Anna Kavan's *Ice* (1967), which is her last publication and, without a doubt, her best-known work up to date. It is a spy novel, *sensu largo*, set in a nameless, very pithily described uchronia. In the words of Christopher Priest (2017: 7), the "virtually plotless story, told in scenes of happenstance and coincidence," acquaints the reader with "the images of the ordinary world through shifting mirrors and distorting lenses, without attempting to explain" (9), which may leave them feeling stranded and confused. As observed by Sam Pulham and Rob Prouse (2018): "The whole novel is presented in quite repetitive, episodic form which seems almost to reset itself from chapter to chapter," which makes it all the more difficult to "gather any concrete information" about the characters or their whereabouts, for "the world affairs seem to travel [only] through rumours or word of mouth […], muffled through the snowstorm or sheets of white noise" (ibid.). The world and the story of *Ice* disregard typical mimetic representation of reality, focusing on what is epistemically, aesthetically, and emotively complex and multi-layered. Kavan lays bare or – on occasion – completely obscures the processes underlying changes in characterial perception: in this sense her work is a counter-narration that is sustained by oxymora, contradictions, diegetic shifts, and by textualised experiences and affects that are proto-linguistic or pre-emotional. The author seems perfectly at peace with the fact that one can never fully penetrate emotional, somatic, or affective depths of fictionalised characters; their relationships; or them experiencing, internalising, and working through the consequences of various events. In this sense, "experimenting with the experiment" while penning her fictional creations, she effectively contrasts the major constituents of human affectivity, many of which can be identified, following Brian Massumi's conceptualisations in his seminal article "The Autonomy of Affect," as "mind and body, but also volition and cognition, at least two orders of language, expectation and suspense, body depth and epidermis, past and future, action and reaction, happiness and sadness, quiescence and arousal, passivity and activity" (Massumi 1995: 94).

The story focuses on two men deeply entangled in the web of international espionage, who are engaged in a series of political and military intrigues and a hectic race for survival: the world of *Ice* faces an impending calamity in the form of rapid glaciation; the reader does not know much about the imminent catastrophe, although the narrator constantly incites

a sense of urgency and paranoia. He tries to take hold of a woman he desires, but his efforts are thwarted each time by his personal nemesis. The spectral girl, Kavan's literary alter ego, can be seized neither physically nor discursively; one may quickly notice that her symbolic and linguistic representations are lacking and imperfect – the same can eventually be said of the nameless pursuer and his immediate environs:

> The situation was alarming, the atmosphere tense, the emergency imminent. There was talk of a secret act of aggression by some foreign power, but no one knew what had actually happened. The government would not disclose the facts. I was informed privately of a steep rise in radioactive pollution, pointing to the explosion of a nuclear device, but of an unknown type, the consequences of which could not be accurately predicted. […] News from abroad was censored, but travel was left unrestricted. (Kavan 2017: 34–35)

Eschatological unrest in the world of *Ice* is grafted onto what could essentially be identified as a sort of limbo, a liminal space delimited by two threshold events: one that triggered the impending end of the world, and the other being the end in and of itself. The downfall of humanity is portrayed nearly as an occurrence of no greater consequence, one that nobody tries to avert: "Silence obtruded itself. Nothing moved. The devastation was even greater than it had seemed from the boat. Not a building intact. […] Little had been done to repair this wholesale destruction" (45). At the same time, as dispassionately observed by the protagonist:

> It could have been any town, in any country. I recognized nothing. Snow covered all landmarks with the same white padding. Buildings were changed into anonymous white cliffs. […] The awful featureless scene did not change, the same derelict stony waste extended to the horizon in every direction, no sign of life or water. The whole country seemed stone dead, grey in colour, no hills except hills of stones, even its natural contours destroyed by war. (129, 141)

As assessed by Victoria Walker (2012: 86), Kavan's late novels are, in essence, "a fragmentary and fluid montage of images that form and disperse," being a *mélange* of quasi-realistic depictions of most bleak scenery and a deeply introspective narrative of self-preservation, and – to all intents and purposes – self-(re)creation on the part of the narrators. "Kavan frames each scene, painting the backdrop, lighting the set and positioning the reader's view, like a camera, 'from the air' or from 'ground-level' and shifting it as 'the dream angle changes a little'" (ibid.), in which

respect the novel's world, despite its apparent uniformity, seems to be as important as the characters themselves. Given its defragmented, parallactic portrayal, one may surmise that reality ceases to be based on *logic* and, in turn, becomes founded and formed by – and in – *logos*. In other words, for something to be actualised, imbued with meaning, or put in motion, it first needs to be *textualised*, which is all the more problematic since in *Ice*, just like in Brooke-Rose's *Out*, there is no real past and nothing can be appraised as ontologically stable.

Kavan's bleak, defeatist portrayal of the human condition can also be ascertained on the basis of her de-anthropomorphising the majority of the characters, whose "shapes were queer, only partially human" (Kavan 2017: 77). "They were silent, unmoving, hardly seemed alive" (140). As assessed by the protagonist, the situation the humankind finds itself in is a form of divine retribution: he speaks of "the weight of collective guilt. A frightful crime had been committed, against nature, against the universe, against life. By rejecting life, man had destroyed the immemorial order, destroyed the world; now everything was about to crash down" (173–174). It appears nigh impossible to gauge how accurate the character's predictions are, for he himself acknowledges the unstable ontic status of reality and his limited knowledge, at times recognising nothing but "intermittent glimpses of my surroundings, which seemed vaguely familiar, and yet distorted, unreal. My ideas were confused. In a peculiar way, the unreality of the outer world appeared to be an extension of my own disturbed state of mind" (78). As commented upon by one of Kavan's biographers, "boundaries between hallucination and reality are constantly dissolved in *Ice*, so that the narrative appears discontinuous, its linear structure constantly undermined by flashbacks and the interiorization of events at the expense of developing storyline" (Reed 2006: 135).

The author goes with her artistic conceit one step further, as not only does the narrator fail to recognise his environs as much as various characters phase in and out of the narrative, but the narrative itself is retransfigured semantically and temporally in a number of ways. Each instance is different, and has a different narrative reason for a formal shift; to exemplify – the relatively objective accounts are interwoven into, or broken by, nightmare sequences and *vice versa*. As such, each also results in either a paralepsis or a paralipsis, both notions proposed by Genette in his *Narrative Discourse*. The former idea pertains to the situation when the reader has been given more information than the narrative situation necessitates or requires (Genette 1983: 203) – for instance the breach in focalisation allows the reader to learn more about the intratextual world

than some of its characters already know. The paralipsis (52ff.; 205) pertains to the opposite situation, in which the reader is denied certain information even though it should have been made clear by a given point in the narrative. Such a "semantic displacement" results in a unique, highly idiosyncratic parallactic portrayal of reality that further complicates the eschatological dimension of the novel. Even though the narrative suggests that the *éskhaton*, the end and the ultimate demise of the humanity is near, at one point the protagonist disregards "the collective deathwish, the fatal impulse to self-destruction" (Kavan 2017: 151), which is deeply embedded in some people, and quite optimistically entertains the idea that "perhaps human life might survive. The life here was over. But life was continuing and expanding in a different place. We could be incorporated in this wider life, if we chose" (152). In Anna Kavan's *Ice*, unlike in Brooke-Rose's novel, there might be a way *out*, even if the reader gets nothing but a tantalising glimpse of a sheer possibility.

Against "Literary Exhaustion": Presenting the Unpresentable

In 1967 John Barth penned a short reflection on the state of contemporary literary practices, very tellingly titled "The Literature of Exhaustion," wherein he ponders upon the possibilities of realism and its potential boundaries. "By 'exhaustion' I don't mean anything so tired as the subject of physical, moral, or intellectual decadence," states Barth, "only the used-upness of certain forms or exhaustion of certain possibilities" (Barth 1977: 70). Quite acerbically, the author subcategorises his colleagues into three types: "A technically old-fashioned artist, a technically up-to-date civilian, and a technically up-to-date artist" (72–73), all exuding different energy, professing divergent opinions, and writing in a markedly dissimilar style. The majority of them, by Barth's standards, desperately cling to obsolete ideas, which in turn sustains and perpetuates a cultural malaise as well as a creative inertia that they cannot possibly overcome. In his opinion, rarely anyone who "confronts an intellectual dead end […] employs it against itself to accomplish new human work" (76). Such a solution may seem typical of late modernism, but – as Lecia Rosenthal claims – "as much as modernism may want to move forward, toward an uncharted space and autarchic form of writing, it never escapes the anxiety that drives the search: the fear that the space of the new, the significant allure of the cutting edge, has been overtaken

and exhausted, saturated by the accumulated residue of so many nonalternatives" (Rosenthal 2011: 5–6). The problem is particularly endemic to affect-laden, experimental, and avant-garde literature, especially that marked by eschatological unrest – as is the case with B.S. Johnson, Rayner Heppenstall, Stefan Themerson, Ann Quin, Eva Figes, Christine Brooke-Rose, or Anna Kavan.

Literature in question is the writing *of* and *on* the unpresentable, the disregarded, the marginalised. It touches upon "what is not there," what defies logic, what eludes easy verbalisation. As one may surmise, the authors who mostly utilise more experimental narrative and formal techniques in their prose, be it consciously or not, are those who wish to communicate against all odds, and their textualised experiences can be found in narrative disruptions, apophases, and reiterations. Their predilection for daring experimentation can be accounted for and rationalised by affectivity in and of their texts, partially traceable in their fragmentation, *mise-en-abîme* repetitions, employed paraleptic and paraliptic shifts, unmarked defocalisation, breaches in spatio-temporal relations, seeming illogicality and erratic behaviour of their spectral, oftentimes disembodied characters – all of those amount to the *sui generis* nature of their fiction and its distinctively visceral quality, praiseworthy to some, abhorrent to others. At the same time such highly idiosyncratic literature is not one of weakness, lack, or silence. On the contrary, it gives voice to the dispossessed, making the reader more attuned to other subjectivities, to what is present but not tangible, to what binds the human, the inhuman, and the phantasmal, very often after a momentous event. In this sense, both *Out* and *Ice* subdue "exhaustion" and the creative impasse mentioned by Barth, also reminding one of a potential infinitude of interpretations – there is no one (prescriptively) correct exegesis of a text, because every act of reading is a one-of-a-kind, highly intimate and affect-laden dialogue between two subjectivities – each different, each unique. Thus interpreted, the affective potential of more experimental literature can only be actualised under specific conditions, and even in most auspicious circumstances the reader – especially one facing the aftermath of the event – may not be able to tell truth from make-believe nor the dreamer from the dream.

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